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Koreas Move Closer to Negotiations

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Special to The New York Times

SEOUL, South Korea, Aug. 9 — The two Koreas inched closer today toward their first talks in nearly three years when North Korea proposed a preliminary meeting next week at the truce village of Panmunjom.

The North's offer was the latest in a series of proposals and counterproposals from both sides aimed at easing tension. Ruling and opposition party leaders in Seoul said they had no immediate response, although they said they hoped to reply by the end of the week.

After the South Korean President, Roh Tae Woo, made new overtures to the North in a speech on July 7, North Korea proposed on July 21 that the two parliaments meet to discuss a nonaggression pact. On Aug. 1, South Korea called for a preliminary meeting to discuss a possible agenda for joint parliamentary talks.

Aug. 17 Is Proposed Date

Today's North Korean proposal, delivered like the others through liaison officers at Panmunjom, agreed to a preliminary meeting and set Aug. 17 as a possible date. But North Korea continued to push for the parliamentary talks, suggesting a five-day session beginning Aug. 26 to discuss a nonaggression pact and North Korea's demand to serve as co-host of the Olympic Games. The Games are scheduled to start in Seoul Sept. 17, and the International Olympic Committee has ruled out previous North Korean proposals to be a co-host.

While some South Korean opposition leaders expressed hopes that talks between the two sides could start soon, ruling party politicians said ambiguities in the North's latest offer might pose problems for future discussions.

In previous letters, the North had called for full parliamentary talks, but now appeared to be broadening the talks to include representatives of several, unspecified sectors of society.

According to an excerpt of the North Korean letter made public by the South Korean Government today, the North said, "If the proposed South-North parliamentary talks were only for a limited number of delegates and excluded delegates of political parties and social organizations and individuals from various circles, it could not be recognized as a proper conference befitting reality."

Kim Dae Jung Optimistic

Kim Dae Jung, president of the Peace and Democracy Party, the largest single opposition group, said today, "I believe the meeting on Aug. 17 will take place," although he said he had to consult with other political parties.

But Choi Chang Yoon, a senior ruling party legislator, said the South would have to study the apparent shift in the North's position on parliamentary talks. "We still have suspicions of the real intentions of North Korea," he said.

The flurry of overtures is raising public expectations at a time when President Roh is facing pressure to improve relations with the North. Students have already begun skirmishing with riot policemen, who have pledged to block their plans for a student meeting with North Korea to be held at Panmunjom next Monday. The police blocked a similar meeting on June 10.

Slow Process Shows Deep Distrust

But the slow exchange of proposals and counterproposals, each containing slight but important shifts in position, indicates the depth of distrust that separates the two countries.

Korea was divided at the end of World War II. Families on opposite sides of the Demilitarized Zone may not visit or send mail to each other.

Earlier talks on such exchanges and on broadening economic relations have repeatedly broken down. North Korea formally broke off the latest such talks in early 1986.

South Korean academics, Government officials and politicians have all pointed to East and West Germany as a possible example for the two Koreas. But they as well as other longtime Korea-watchers cautioned against excessive optimism.

"Talking is better than not talking," said one Western diplomat here. "But I do think that the genesis of all this being born in such profound distrust means that there is still a lot of slow, patient work ahead."

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